

5 Watching the war against Iraq through pan-Arab satellite TV

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IT WAS the first Gulf War in 1991 which led to the satellite television explosion in the Arab world. Arabs then knew about Iraq's invasion of Kuwait through CNN. Today, Arab satellite channels reach almost every Arab capital and many Middle Eastern and African nations — from Mauritania on the Atlantic coast to Iran in the east, from Syria in the north to Djibouti in the south.

This battle for the airwaves and boom in satellite channels in the Arab world has become both a tool for integration and dispersion. It is raising a glimpse of hope that the flow of information will no longer be pouring from the West to the East, but from the East to the West. Questions, however, remain about the credibility of news coverage by Arabic networks like the maverick Qatar-based al-Jazeera and whether Arab journalists adhere to journalistic norms upheld in the West.

After watching coverage of the 2003 Iraqi War on Arab networks, one begs to ask: Did Arab television stations mislead their viewers? Should the media offer its viewers and readers what they want even if the credibility of such information is in question?

Rise of Arab satellite TV

The satellite station business in the Arab world has never been as dynamic, with many Arabs tuning in to pan-Arab satellite channels and turning off their local TV channels. Because of its sheer size and the oil boom that came in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia has played a pivotal role in ownership of the pan-Arab satellite stations. The Saudis own nearly 75 per cent of Arab satellite channels.¹ They

own giant networks such as Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), Arab Radio and Television (ART), and Orbit. Few endeavours have been initiated to counter Saudi dominance. This can be seen in the launching of satellite channels like the Doha-based al-Jazeera in 1996, Lebanon's LBC in 1996, Syrian Arab News Network (ANN) in 1997, Egypt's Nile TV in 1998, and Abu Dhabi TV in 2000. With the exception of al-Jazeera, and to some extent Abu Dhabi TV, most of these transnational Arab stations are entertainment-oriented and largely detached from the political processes. Al-Jazeera, on the other hand, is an all-news and talk show satellite TV station, with a strong focus on news and current events. Even the newly launched Arab channels aiming to compete with al-Jazeera, like Abu Dhabi TV and al-Arabiya, tend to be less controversial in their coverage.

The Dubai-based al-Arabiya was launched in February 2003 by the Saudis (Kuwaiti and Lebanese businessmen are said to have also invested in the channel). The channel's parent network TV channel, MBC, argues that its goal is to provide 'a balanced alternative' to the Qatari channel. Al-Arabiya's all-news format has a special focus on news of importance to Arab viewers.

The timetable below shows the development of major satellite channels in the Arab world:

Table 1: Development of major Arab satellite channels

Date	Name	Country Affiliation	Ownership
1990	ESC	Egypt	State
1991	MBC	Saudi Arabia	Private
1992	Dubai EDTV	United Arab Emirates	State
1993	JSC	Jordan	State
1994	ART	Saudi Arabia	Private
	Orbit	Saudi Arabia	Private
	RTM	Morocco	State
1995	STV	Syria	State
1996	LBC-Sat	Lebanon	Private
	Future International	Lebanon	Private
	Al-Jazeera	Qatar	Independent
1997	ANN	Syria	Private
1998	Nile Channels	Egypt	State
2000	Abu Dhabi TV	United Arab Emirates	State
2003	Al-Arabiya	Saudi Arabia	Private

Source: Compiled by the author after consulting various newsletters, public relations releases, and Sakr, Naomi (2001). Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalisation and the Middle East. London: IB Tauris.

The special case of al-Jazeera

Al-Jazeera (Arabic for 'the peninsula') has generated a cultural revolution in the media industry in the Arab world. There are three main reasons behind the prominence of what is being characterised as the first independent Arab television station. First, is the Qatari station's focus on hard news and the hiring of many of the finest news broadcasters who worked for the Saudi-funded BBC Arabic Service prior to the Saudis forcing it out of business in 1996. Second, is an attempt to dent CNN and BBC's monopoly over coverage of events in the Arab world. Thirdly, is an attempt to weaken the Saudi grip on the Arab and Muslim media sphere.

Al-Jazeera has influenced almost every Arab government and breathed new life into Arab mass broadcasting. It offers around-the-clock programming; exploring issues long suppressed by Arab regimes such as lack of democracy, press freedom, repression of women and the persecution of political dissidents. It has become a forum for more than 30 million Arab viewers and gained international acclaim after exclusively airing Osama bin Laden's tapes and footage of the war in Afghanistan.

In this sense, the Qatari station posed a big challenge to the dominant Saudi satellite stations in the region. Similarly, al-Arabiya may be viewed as an attempt by the Saudis to attract viewers from al-Jazeera. In the past, some Arab regimes lobbied to influence al-Jazeera's coverage by cutting advertising. Others have shut down the channel's bureaus in their states. There is also the issue of animosity between the Saudis and the emir of Qatar whose coup was opposed by the Saudi royal family.

For its strong focus on current events, many Arabs have dubbed al-Jazeera, the 'CNN of the Arab world'. However, the credibility of al-Jazeera, particularly of its reporting on the Iraqi War and sensational news coverage, remains in question. After all, the station was founded under a decree from the emir of Qatar.

Coverage of the Iraq War

The Iraqi War was one of the most extensively televised wars in the history of humanity, with Arabs watching for the first time a war through their own lenses. Al-Jazeera was one of several Arab satellite channels, most prominent of which are Abu Dhabi TV, LBC and al-Arabiya, broadcasting round-the-clock coverage on the Iraqi war from Baghdad in what has been a historic moment in the



history of journalism in the Arab world. Those Arab TV channels provided some of the first real-time images from the battlefield into the homes of not just the Arabs but in the abode of many people around the globe. Their coverage helped Western journalists grasp for the first time what Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Washington-based Project for

Excellence in Journalism, qualified as the ‘Rashomon quality of news’ — the experience of different people witnessing the same event yet interpreting it from widely differing perspectives.²

Unlike other Arab TV networks, al-Jazeera is the only one to have had a permanent office in Baghdad since 1998. This made the Qatari station unique since no Western media network was allowed into Iraq until last year. The station’s coverage of the Iraqi War came with different tones but was in many ways pro-Saddam Hussein. For this, it has been accused by the United States of broadcasting unedited stories and misrepresenting facts. The Qatari station was castigated by US officials for broadcasting a video provided by Iraqi officials of corpses of US soldiers and prisoners-of-wars being questioned by Iraqis. American networks, which had access to the tape through subscription to the Qatari station, refused to run it. CNN and Fox did, however, run still frames while insuring that individuals were not identified. This was followed by the expulsion of two al-Jazeera reporters from the trading floors of the New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ.

While US and British media reported that bombs appeared to have hit a bus carrying Syrian civilians in Iraq, al-Jazeera broadcast that a missile strayed and hit a bus in Syria, killing five passengers. CNN referred to ‘Coalition forces’, al-Jazeera called them ‘invading Americans’. CNN vied for the ‘human story’ by interviewing families of US POWs, al-Jazeera kept updating the war’s death toll.³ While CNN and Sky reported that the Fao peninsula and Umm Qasr had fallen in the first days to US coalition troops, al-Jazeera was running reports and quoting Iraqi officials denying those claims.

This tug-of-war between al-Jazeera and US officials intensified following the US bombing of the network's Baghdad office on 8 April 2003, with employees speculating that the station was hit in retaliation over its war coverage. One of the network's journalists was killed and another was wounded. Al-Jazeera described its dead journalist as a 'martyr of duty' and showed footage of the other journalist whose chest was covered in blood.

There was also a distinction in coverage of the war by both al-Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV. The latter carved out a niche for itself in southern Iraq and did far better in transmitting footages from Umm Qasr. It followed American and British troops closely as they dispatched troops and vehicles by helicopter prior to the breakout of war and control of the Iraqi province. Al-Jazeera did a superb job covering Baghdad and the Iraqi Kurdish community in the north.

Conclusion

Most of the pan-Arab media channels are in the hands of elites, princes or businessmen, who hold close ties with governments. In this sense, rarely do we see articles critical of ruling families or presidents. Although al-Jazeera is an icon of free speech, we have yet to see a story that touches negatively on Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani who ousted his father from office while he was abroad in 1995. The channel's programmes such as *Opposite Directions* and *More Than One Opinion* are sensational talk shows that attract only extremists' views while ignoring moderate voices which constitute the majority of Arab public opinion.

There is also the notion of journalistic standards and ethics such as balance and fairness that we have been taught in journalism schools in the West. While Western television channels were transmitting images of US victory (which was to some extent the truth), al-Jazeera turned the whole war into images of 'Iraqi' victory in the minds of Arabs. In a bid to gain viewership, the most watched Arab satellite channel associated itself with the Iraqi regime, and hence alienated and deceived its viewers by not giving the whole story.

Al-Jazeera failed an emotional Arab public through biases and by accepting Iraqi and American officials' statements at face value without questioning their accuracy. This is not necessarily exhibited in the way the channel showed vivid coverage of wounded Iraqi children in hospitals, but in giving Arab viewers what they wanted: a war that the Americans cannot win easily. In this sense, the Qatari station was catering mainly and purely for the resentment on the Arab street.

It is true that the biggest Arab TV station has changed the media scene in the Arab world since the 1991 Persian Gulf War. It did so by unnerving US officials and infuriating Arab governments. But it is also true that its coverage of the second Iraqi War was biased and in many ways too pro-Iraqi. The Qatari station gave Arabs false images equal to the 'flag waving' propaganda disseminated by the US media, which are constrained by the forces of monopoly and corporate greed.

The station should work at becoming a true arena for political discourse by offering balanced coverage. Other Arab channels like al-Arabiya, Abu Dhabi TV, and LBC should follow suit. I remain very optimistic that as the seeds of a free form of journalism are planted in the Middle East, political reform will finally crystallise.

Arab journalists should strive to provide their readers and viewers with objective information so that they can make informed judgements about events. For Arab media to progress, Arab journalists need to learn how to cull the truly significant from the trivial, identify the reliable from the questionable, and succinctly deliver the meaning behind the data to their readers and listeners. It is only then that the Arab media can truly help in building social democratic systems of government in the Arab world that are compatible with those in the West. And, alas, the whole world is watching.

Notes

- 1 Taylor, Julian (1999, September). Satellite Saturation. *The Middle East*, p. 38.
- 2 Sharkey, Jacqueline E. (2003, May). The Rise of Arab TV. *American Journalism Review*. www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=2990 (Retrieved 10 June 2003).
- 3 Nelson, Emily (2003, April 4). Camera Angles: Battlefield for Viewers Colors TV Picture Coming from Iraq — Different Coverage by CNN, Al-Jazeera Shows Influence of Ideology and Commerce — ‘“Invading” vs “Coalition” Forces’, *Wall Street Journal*, p. A1.

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